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# Advancing Gender Equality: the Co-operative Way

By Lisa Schincariol McMurtry and J J McMurtry

International Labour Organisation. 2015. Available from [www.ilo.org](http://www.ilo.org)

This report was published as part of the ILO-Alliance Phase 1 Project.

It is now 20 years since the adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action adopted at the Fourth World Conference on women laid down a direction of travel for gender equality. Additionally, the Blueprint for a Co-operative Decade (Mills and Davies, 2013) focuses in part on increasing equality and mapping good practice on gender equality. It is also, of course, integral to Co-operative Principles (ICA, 2015) and part of co-operatives' commitment to voluntary and open membership. This report, published on behalf of the International Labour Organisation and International Co-operative Alliance, provides a thermometer on progress so far within the co-operative sector and draws on surveys and interviews with "experts and practitioners from the co-operative, labour, and women's movements" (p3).

Over 500 respondents completed the online survey with half from primary co-operatives, and over 66 per cent of the total female. Of these, the number of respondents was similar from producer, co-operative, and worker co-operatives. Nearly a quarter were from banking/financial sector and just under 20% agriculture, and 13% retail. From this survey, 18 respondents took part in semi-structured interviews.

In general, most of the survey respondents (75%) believed that co-operatives had improved the participation of women in the last 20 years, with areas such as attention to gender issues, and women in leadership roles. There has been a slow, but definite increase in the number of women-owned co-operatives.

Key achievements were seen in terms of co-operatives improving women's access to employment, business and market places (through availability of financial, legal and marketing services and support for start-up and growth of businesses). In addition, co-operatives were viewed as providing accessible services and personal development and empowerment opportunities. The report provides examples from respondents of the impact of co-operatives in regard to social inclusion, economic and social development, women's empowerment as well as increased gender equality.

One of the challenges in continuing to achieve these in-roads into bridging equality gaps was seen to be in the balance between social and economic goals. Here, the report makes reference to the pressure to maximise shareholder value to the detriment of social goals (p13). Women in leadership roles tends to mirror that of other sectors, where there may be significant number of women involved in grassroots or operational participation in co-operatives, but are less visible in strategic leadership and governance roles and positions. The report specifically states that more needs to be done to improve the promotion of women from membership to governance and management levels (p14). The report also points to both geographic and regional differences as well as sectoral differences. For example, participation at leadership levels is greater in Europe and sub-Saharan Africa, but below 'average' in the USA and Middle East.

As might be expected, the gendered nature of occupations and daily activities may also be a factor in that women's membership is greater in consumer co-operatives than in agricultural or financial co-operatives. Even so, the latter reported higher levels of gender equality related training, policies and strategies than other sectors (p15). Some of these are compliance

oriented eg equal opportunities policies; some related more to affirmative action in relation to representation (eg quotas on boards).

The report sets out a number of specific actions suggested by respondents including equality action plans (revised every 3, 5 or 10 years); gender equality standards; internal gender equality committees with board representations; facilitation of women's asset ownership; and promotional events to enhance the visibility of women in co-operatives; and increased research to evaluate the impacts of equality strategies within co-operatives; agreed indicators and measures of participation of women at all levels of co-operative activities (pp17-18).

Respondents also suggested the need for increased co-operation between co-operatives. This was seen as a key ingredient to enabling the development of new women-owned co-operatives, specifically in relation to increasing the visibility of women in male dominated industry sectors. This might also support access to financial and technical resources and know-how. Small co-operatives and women's co-operatives were seen as marginalised in relation to capacity building and although international expertise helps to fill this gap, more needs to be developed and based regionally.

Cultural and systemic issues were also identified. Cultural barriers — expectations of women's household roles, access to education for girls — were seen to be the most significant obstacles to gender equality (65% respondents). As such, women's only co-operatives played an important role — alongside alliances with, for example, women's labour and environmental movements — in redressing issues of patriarchal and legal constraints, and embedded social inequalities.

Although most respondents thought that governments had a strong role to play in addressing gender inequalities, there was lack of agreement about governments' overall effectiveness. Many respondents suggested intervention in creating positive policy environments for co-operatives in addition to legitimising the co-operative model through legislative frameworks.

The report concludes with a summary of findings and key messages. Co-operatives are generally perceived as providing "platforms for achieving gender equality and women's empowerment" (p22). It was, however, acknowledged that this cannot be achieved in isolation and alliances across non-government organisations and civil society can enhance co-operatives opportunities to gain government recognition, and to address gender equality within and across co-operatives.

## The Reviewer

Jan Myers is an academic and researcher at Newcastle Business School, Northumbria University and Editor of the *Journal of Co-operative Studies*.

## References

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